



**SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA,
COUNTY OF KINGS**

**FAQ OF LEMOORE
COURT CLOSURE AND
OTHER COST-SAVING
MEASURES**

The State's ongoing fiscal crisis has required all government agencies to closely examine their operations and expenditures. Over these years, the Kings County Superior Court has evaluated cost efficiencies and effectiveness, wherever necessary.

Despite the Kings County Superior Court's history of prudent fiscal planning, effective cost-cutting measures, and revenue generating strategies, the Court now faces an immediate deficit of approximately \$1.3 million in the 2012-13 fiscal year, which began on July 1, 2012.

The most severe fiscal crisis that the Court has ever faced is well beyond anything that could have been anticipated.

The Court had to explore numerous options for reducing costs and increasing efficiency. Additionally, our Judiciary has met many times and the Courts have communicated its budget deficit to Kings County and City of Lemoore officials. The urgency of the Courts budget deficit has caused the Judiciary and the Management to make numerous difficult decisions.

The Court concluded that closing the Lemoore branch court would realize a significant immediate cost savings. The Court believes that by consolidating some operations into the Hanford and Corcoran Courts and implementing the other cost-savings measures discussed herein, efficiency and operational effectiveness would be created which will supplement many other cuts.

Pursuant to the California Government Code Section 68016 and California Rules of Court, rule 10.620, the Superior Court of Kings County is hereby giving urgent notice that the Lemoore Court will close effective September 10, 2012. Cases will be heard in Hanford for Attorney represented Family Law Litigants and in Corcoran for Family Law matters involving pro per litigants. Other measures may cause a delay in processing matters. In addition, effective immediately, Family Law Court Facilitator services offered at the Lemoore Court will be reduced from two days per week to one. Beginning September 12, 2012, the Court's Clerks' Offices, will close at 11:30 a.m. on Friday.

The consolidation of Court services will provide the opportunity to improve operational efficiency for core court services. The Kings County Superior Court will do its best to minimize the operational impact and make the transition as easy as possible. Any interested person or entity who wishes to comment in writing may do so by any of the following methods:

E-mail: tbarton@kings.courts.ca.gov

-OR-

Correspondence: ATTN: Court Executive
1426 South Drive
Hanford, CA 93230

As required by the California Rules of Court, Rule 10.620 and California Government Code Section 68016, all public input received shall be provided to the person or persons making these difficult decisions.

BRANCH COURT CONSOLIDATION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Why is the Kings County Superior Court closing the Lemoore Court?

A: Recently, Governor Jerry Brown announced drastic funding reductions to the State's Judicial Branch and the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). As a result, the Kings County Superior Court must absorb \$1.3 million in direct cuts and unfunded cost increases in the current fiscal year of 2012-2013.

This is in addition to the \$1 million in budget reductions that the court absorbed this past year and the Court expects to absorb a larger reduction next year. The Governor has noted that the state trial courts will suffer additional budget cuts in the 2013-14 Fiscal Year.

The legislation the Governor signed also included the provision for Courts to expend all their reserve fund balances no later than June 30, 2014. For your Superior Court, the monies saved over the years is projected to be \$1.4 million; money that the Court planned to use to operate through 2014 to retain staff and operational status quo. Despite the Superior Courts past careful fiscal planning, effective cost-cutting measures, and revenue-generating strategies, the Court now faces an immediate deficit of \$1.3 million in the 2012-13 Fiscal Year that started on July 1, 2012. This most severe fiscal crisis that the Court has ever faced is well beyond anything that could have been anticipated.

The Judiciary, management and staff of the Superior Court understands and regrets that closing the Lemoore branch court will result in inconveniences to our residents and other citizens doing business with this court.

The consolidation of many Court services may provide the Court with the opportunity to improve operational efficiency for core services. The Court seeks to continue exploring ways to utilize current technology to improve its operational effectiveness as well as access to the Court for all Kings County residents.

Q: How significant are the budget cuts in relation to the Court's budget?

A: From fiscal year 2007-2008 to fiscal year 2012-2013, the Court has seen a reduction in its Trial Court Trust Fund allocation from \$7,970,000 to \$4,700,000, a 41% reduction. In past years some additional monies, however, have been made available from Courthouse Construction and Repair funds.

Q: When will the courts close?

A: Time is of the essence. Due to compounding costs, the longer the Court waits, the more drastic the financial situation will become later in the 2012-13 Fiscal Year. The Lemoore Branch will cease operations September 10, 2012.

Q: How much will the closures save?

A: Consolidating operations will save the Kings County Superior Court approximately \$90,000 to \$100,000 this year in overhead costs for: perimeter security, bailiff services, computers and printers, computer lines to the courthouse in Lemoore from Hanford, phones, copiers, messenger services, alarm systems, security cameras, facility cleaning equipment, supplies, mileage costs, etc. This decision may eventually result in savings in state facility funding for taxpayers, when the AOC will no longer be responsible for the maintenance of the facility.

Q: Why not close a few courtrooms in Hanford, Corcoran or Avenal locations?

A: There are several reasons why this is not a good idea. The Kings County Superior Court has operated branch courts as a convenience to residents/litigants outside the Hanford area in an effort to maintain access to justice.

The Judiciary believes in a continued need for a west side presence in Avenal, especially due to its distance from Hanford and the I-5 corridor.

The Corcoran Court, while it meets the need of its residents, services three state prisons for arraignments and provides a Family Support Court.

The Court now needs to centralize all available judicial resources and personnel to meet the high demand for services from Kings County residents. Court staff will face a mandatory 27 days of unpaid furlough leave and some layoffs. Reduction of staff impacts Court and public services. The Family Law Court which now resides in Lemoore will be moved to Hanford and Corcoran without severe harm to the public.

Q: How long have you known about these closures?

A: The Governor's initial budget reductions were announced on May 14, 2012 but the actual budget bills were not signed until the last week in June. The California Judicial Council held a meeting to discuss the financial impact to the State's trial courts on May 17th, giving the Kings County Superior Court days to make budget reductions before the beginning of the new fiscal year.

The Judges met frequently with key Management personnel to discuss operational reductions, potential closures, furloughs and layoffs.

There have been meetings with Kings County Officials and Avenal and Lemoore leadership. Due to the urgency of the situation and to maximize efficiency immediately, it is necessary to make difficult and drastic decisions quickly.

After numerous hours of debate and careful consideration of all cost-cutting measures, Court leaders arrived at the inevitable conclusion that closing the Lemoore Branch Court is one of the many necessary steps to maintain core operations in light of these staggering budget cuts.

The Court has opened a 60-day comment period to receive feedback on this matter and is very interested in hearing any suggestion for providing efficient services to all county residents, especially those in the areas served by the closing branch court. Anyone who wishes to submit a comment may do so via email to tbarton@kings.courts.ca.gov.

Q: Where and how will the cases from these communities be heard?

A: Family Law cases will be transferred to the Hanford and Corcoran courthouses. Primarily, attorney-represented Family Law matters will be heard in the Jury Assembly Room on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. Primarily, Family Law Pro Per matters will be heard at the Courthouse in Corcoran all day Wednesdays. The litigants will be notified by letter of the location and time changes. Family Law Mediation will occur in Hanford Building "B", on the second floor outside of courtroom departments 1 and 2. The Family Law Facilitators will maintain the current hours in Hanford and Corcoran. Traffic payments previously taken in Lemoore will be processed in Hanford.

Closure of Lemoore will begin on September 10, 2012.

Q: How can people in rural communities, many of whom are struggling financially, afford the added cost of travel to Hanford?

A: At this time, traffic matters, civil and small claim matters and misdemeanor cases will remain heard in Avenal and Corcoran.

The Kings County Superior Court website offers information and access to many court forms. Residents may pay traffic tickets online and even contest traffic citations via a written Trial By Declaration (TBD). This process is outlined on the Court's website [www.kings.courts.ca.gov].

Q: What other ways have you cut costs?

A: In the past two years, the Court has frozen non-vital vacancies and operates with fewer staff positions, though the work volume remains the same. The Court also has experienced numerous reductions in operating costs. A mandatory furlough program was implemented in 2011-2012 requiring each employee to take 15 days of unpaid leave annually. For the 2012-13 Fiscal Year, employees will be required to take 27 days of unpaid furloughs.

Beyond reductions in personnel costs, the Court has realized other savings. Equipment purchases and travel for training that are not covered by grants have been reduced or suspended. Janitorial and security services have already been significantly reduced and will be decreased even more. Strategies for reducing toner, paper, and other office supplies have also been implemented to cut costs considerably.

Q: How much of the Court's budget is staff salaries and will you cut them?

A: For the 2012-13 Fiscal Year, 67% percent of the Court's general operating budget is for personnel costs. The Court has frozen all management salaries, all staff will experience an unpaid 27 days worth of furloughs, and there may be additional layoffs of line staff and possibly some managers. The Court hopes that many of these positions will come from natural attrition such as retirements or general leaves. The Court announced to its employees that there will be furloughs and/or staff layoffs.

Q: Are you also reducing judicial pay?

A: All Judicial pay is set by state statute and the California Constitution. Oversight and funding for your judges is at the sole jurisdiction of the California Constitution and State Legislature. As elected officials, their salaries cannot be reduced mid-term or without legislative authority. No such authority exists. Judges are paid directly by the State of California, reducing their pay would not realize any savings to local court operations, because judges are not paid locally from the Court's budget.

Q: Will the closed courts ever reopen?

A: Given the severity of the Court's fiscal situation, it is likely the Lemoore Courthouse will never reopen.

The proposed new Courthouse in Hanford, constructed by State Department of Finance Bonds is intended to eliminate the operation of the Lemoore Courthouse in FY 2015-2016. The County of Kings may have plans to facilitate a Library expansion at the Lemoore Courthouse in the future.

Q: Will this affect juvenile cases?

A: Juvenile Delinquency and Dependency matters will not be affected by the consolidations.

Q: Will the closures increase the burden to Lemoore Police department in the affected communities?

A: All Traffic payments will be moved to the Hanford Courthouse. As to contested citations, those matters have been heard in Hanford for the past 6 years. The Lemoore Police Department will not be affected. They will receive fewer calls from the Courts in Lemoore, when it pertains to courthouse break-ins, domestic disturbances in Court, illegal activities and illegal parking.

Q: What will be the effect on county and community agencies?

A: County and Community organizations may experience a decrease travel time and costs. The improved efficiency from consolidation operations into Hanford may also save them time, manpower and mileage. The Court will continue to explore ways to improve access to Court services through technology.

Q: The closures will save money this year, but what about future years?

A: The closure of the branch court will provide ongoing savings as will all the other strategies mentioned above. The Court will continue to look for additional ways to improve efficiency and cut costs.

Q: Will the employees who work in these courts be laid off?

A: As a cost-saving measure, the Court has not been filling vacancies unless required for vital operations. The employees in this court will not be laid off at this time. They will be transferred to Hanford and Corcoran.

Q: Won't closing the Lemoore Branch Court create backlogs and delays at the Hanford and Corcoran courthouses?

A: Yes. When the backlogs become unmanageable, the Court may be forced to reduce the clerks' office hours to allow staff to catch up.

Q: Will public counter hours be reduced?

A: Counter hours are from 8:00 A.M. until 4:00 P.M., Mondays through Thursdays. Due to furloughs and layoffs, beginning on September 12, 2012, counter hours on Fridays will be from 8:00 A.M. until 11:30 A.M.

But with the possibility of further budget cuts, or excessive backlogs, further reduction in hours are a possibility.

Q: Can you break the lease or sell the Lemoore building?

A: The Court does not own the facility in question. The facility is owned by the State of California in an agreement with the County. The AOC is still responsible for the Maintenance of the facility.

Q: What if there are additional state budget cuts to the judicial branch in the future?

A: The State budget crisis is not static. If deficits get worse, the Court will work to anticipate future circumstances and adapt as they evolve. Nothing is currently out of the question to allow the Court the ability to react quickly when and if needed.

Q: Who can I contact to provide feedback?

A: If you want to contact Todd Barton, the Court Executive Officer at the Superior Court, please email your comments to tbarton@kings.courts.ca.gov.

If you prefer to contact a State elected official, contact:

Jerry Brown

Governor

State Capitol Building, Suite 1173, Sacramento, CA 95814

(916) 445-2841

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Or you may contact your newspaper or television channel.

Notice will also be posted on the Court's website, www.kings.courts.ca.gov.

We wish to thank the Fresno Superior Court for providing an outline to follow.